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## **An Islamic Perspective of Leadership: Said Nursi and Sayyidhood Leadership**

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### **Abstract**

According to Said Nursi (1877-1960), there is no position except servanthood in Islam. His argument is based on the hadith '*sayyidul qawm khadimihum*' the master of the people is the one who serves them which is quintessential of Islamic leadership. To him, a nation's ruler is a public servant and ruling does not mean domination and despotism. Nursi states that rulers are obliged to serve people and he considers serving as the second article of an Islamic constitution. Instead of calling Islamic leadership servant, guardian or transformational style as some scholars argue in the modern time, I would call Nursi's understanding of leadership '*sayyidhood*' which is drawn from his Magnum Opus *Risale-i Nur*. To him, leadership through action comes before leadership through words. *Sayidhood* leadership is universal as Islam. This article will take the concept of *sayyidhood* in the hadith as a theoretical framework, beginning with the analysis of the hadith's literary meaning and grammatical usage. It also suggests that Nursi revives four major characteristics of *sayyidhood* leadership which are *tamthil* (the inadvertent overspill of genuine practice), *istighna* (a state of being expectationless), *ithar* (altruism) and *musbet hareket* (positive action). By applying these four major principles, the leader can be independent, exemplary, pluralistic and altruistic. He or she will be persuasive rather than oppressive and universal rather than ideological. *Sayyidhood* leadership minimises, selfishness, nepotism and egoism, however, it is highly idealistic and Muslim leaders rarely apply.

**Keywords:** Islamic leadership, sayyidhood, Said Nursi, servant leadership

## INTRODUCTION

There are many theories and types of leadership have been raised in the western literature since the 50s. Servant leadership was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in “The Servant as Leader,” an essay that he first published in 1970<sup>1</sup> in West. Almost forty-five years before Greenleaf, Said Nursi revived, reintroduced and exemplified a broader type of servanthood leadership which I would call “*sayyidhood* leadership.” His view of leadership is based on the hadith of the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh), “the master of the people is the one who serves them” which summarises *sayyidhood* leadership in three words including servant leadership. I would call this hadith the quintessential of *sayyidhood* leadership in Islam. Nursi’s philosophy of leadership is a reflection of above mentioned hadith according to needs of our modern time.

This paper will propose a new leadership concept called *sayyidhood*<sup>2</sup> leadership and apply this to the case of Said Nursi as a key Muslim scholar and spiritual leader who has exemplified this type of leadership style. According to Nursi, there is no position except servanthood in Islam.<sup>3</sup> To him, a nation’s ruler is a public servant and ruling does not mean domination and despotism. Nursi states that rulers are obliged to serve people and he considers serving people by leaders as the second article of an Islamic constitution.<sup>4</sup> This article will take the concept of *sayyidhood* by using above hadith as a theoretical framework, beginning with the analysis of the hadith’s literary meaning and grammatical usage. Although this hadith permeates through all aspect of leadership, this paper will hone on the spiritual significance of the idea of *sayyidhood* leadership. It draws four major characteristics of *sayyidhood* leadership from Nursi’s works. They are *tamthil* (the inadvertent overspill of genuine practice)<sup>5</sup>, *istighna* (a state of being expectationless), *ithar* (altruism) and *musbet hareket* (positive

action). For Nursi, by applying these four major principles, the leader will be independent, exemplary, pluralistic and altruistic. Such leadership will be persuasive rather than oppressive, universal rather than ideological. It will minimise selfishness, nepotism and egoism. However, because of influence, sayyidhood leadership can cause envy among the adherents of the same faith and can be seen as a threat by the rulers.

There are hundreds of books written in regard administration and leadership in the Islamic history. The Fourth Caliph Ali's Nahj al-Balagha, İbnü 'l-Mukaffa's (d.759) Risala fi-l-Sahaba and al-Adab al-Kabir, Ibn Taymiyya's (1263-1328) As-Siyasatu Shari'yya Fi Islahi Ra'i Wa Raiyya, Ibn Qutaiba's (828- 889) Uyūn al-Akhhbār are few of them. One of the first books which fully dedicated to Islamic leadership in the history is "The Law of Islamic of Governance" Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya" by al- Mawardi (972-1058). He provides a detail information about the qualifications, tasks and responsibilities of leaders<sup>6</sup>. However, he does not discuss *sayyidhood* leadership. Another primary source for leadership is al-Ghazali's (1058-1111) book *Nasihat al-Muluk* (Counsels for Kings). He delves into the required characteristic of Kings and Wazirs<sup>7</sup> but does not mention *sayyidhood* leadership. Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) critically analyse various types of leadership (royal, political, military, tribal, religious) in his book *Muqaddimah* in detail and remarks on the leadership of the descendant of the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) but he does not indicate *sayyidhood* leadership.<sup>8</sup> Imam Rabbani (1564-1624) mentions the ethical principles of leadership in his letters to rulers and religious leaders but he does not name *sayyidhood* leadership.<sup>9</sup>

I examined the scholarly comments on the Qur'anic verse (4:59) which is related leadership in more than thirty classical and modern periods' major tafsirs (Qur'anic exegesis). Almost all tafsir scholars discuss who are the *ulu'l amr* ( ..authority among you...) (Qur'an, 4:59) and their characteristics. Most of them argue that "*ulu'l Amr*"

are the scholars but again none of authors of these tafsirs discuss *sayyidhood* leadership.

Bakum and Badawi classify Islamic leadership styles into two: a guardian leader and a servant leader.<sup>10</sup> They discuss the characteristic of servanthood and guardian leadership in the light of the Qur'an and sunnah. The book is based on Islamic sources in a western scholars' leadership framework. Sami Helewa analyses Qisas al- Anbiyas (the story of the prophets) and draws lessons of 'just' leadership.<sup>11</sup> However, none of these scholars touch *sayyidhood* leadership.

This article first will define *sayyidhood* leadership in the light of the sacred texts. Secondly it will analyse how Said Nursi reinterpreted and exemplified above hadith which is the kernel of *sayyidhood* leadership in the light of the Qur'an and the exemplary life of Prophet Muhammed (pbuh), Sahabah, the Companions, great major scholars, saints and Islamic leaders in accord with the modern age. Finally, it will explore how Nursi draws and acts upon the belief that a leader should never see himself as a leader, but as a servant of Muslims and all peoples regardless of their faith, colour and ethnicity as a universal ruler. This article argues that Nursi's understanding of leadership in the sunnah of the Prophet is aligned with the *Salaf Saliheen's*<sup>12</sup> spirituality, rather than political Islam as he says, "all-Wise Qur'an severely prohibited me from the world of politics. . . . Indeed, service of the Qur'an prevents me from thinking of socio-political life."<sup>13</sup>

## **SAYYID IN THE QUR'AN AND SUNNAH**

The word of *Sayyid* is mentioned in the two verses of the Qur'an (3:39, 12:25). A classical period exegete at-Tabari (838-923) explains *Sayyid* as a jurist who is pious, kind, most honorable<sup>14</sup> of believers, and devoted to and most noble in religion. ar-Razi (1149-1209), Zimaksihari (1070-1143)<sup>15</sup> and <sup>16</sup>al-Qushayri (986-1074) state that *Sayyid* is one who does not want any position, expects any

rewards from any creation, and is free from any unlawful desires, making him the best of his people.<sup>17</sup> By this definition, the attributes of *sayyidhood* is more important than a biological connection to descendants of the Prophet. Muhammad Tabatabai defines sayyid as following: "The one who manages the people's affairs related to their lives and livelihood or concerning a socially accepted virtues, subsequently it was used with increasing frequency for honourable and noble inasmuch as above mentioned management affairs entails honours and excellence emanating from his authority, wealth or other such virtues"<sup>18</sup>

The Prophet first used the *Sayyid* title for himself<sup>19</sup> and then gave it directly to his grandson Hasan (r.a).<sup>20</sup> In Islamic literature, it is an honorific title denoting male accepted as descendants of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).<sup>21</sup> *Sayyidhood* is the leadership style of Prophet, the four Rightly Guided Caliphs and righteous leaders. After the Prophet, *Sayyidhood* lasted thirty years<sup>22</sup> during the caliphate period, including the term of Hasan, the Prophet's grandson. Since the Umayyad dynasty, *asabiyya*<sup>23</sup> became the heart of Islamic leadership with some exceptions. Some great Islamic leaders applied *sayyidhood* leadership in their life in varying degrees. This, however, is out of the scope of this article.

The most prominent hadith on *sayyidhood* leadership narrated an incident that occurred during the Madinah period. The Prophet was serving water to his companions when a Bedouin came in and shouted: "Who is the master of this people?" The Messenger answered in such a way that he introduced himself while expressing a strong principle of Islamic leadership and public administration using three words: (*sayyidu'l qawm khadimuhum*) "The master of the people is the one who serves them."<sup>24</sup>

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SAYYIDHOOD LEADERSHIP**

As mentioned above '*sayyidul qawm khadimihum*' the master of the people is the one who serves them, hadith is the quintessential of

leadership. To understand leadership in depth; it is necessary to analyse the hadith from grammatical, literal and contextual perspectives. Then, the focus will turn to how Nursi understands *sayyidhood* leadership within the service of faith and humanity and how he applied this hadith in his daily life.

In order to understand the relevant hadith, the words used require analysis. The term '*Sayyid*' has twenty-seven meanings<sup>25</sup> such as: chief, master, lord, sir, noble man and gentleman. Thus, *sayyidhood* necessitates understanding of all aspects of a tribe and consultation with the people one serves. Based on the hadith, people who serve others must be their '*Sayyids*' or chiefs or the chiefs must be like *Sayyids* who must be knowledgeable and have the capacity to enlighten the heart and mind. This title necessities to be insightful and follow the footsteps of the Prophet and Four Rightly Guided Caliphs. For enlightening heart and mind, it necessitates having *marifa*, a depth knowledge of God, wisdom and a great inspirational vision which includes understanding leadership according to need of the time.

*Ma'rifa* is a step to understand God's names in depth after the faith for reaching the degree of *muhabba* (love). A leader who equipped with *ma'rifa* would be able to be full aware of service and love his people. This can reflect in serving at the degree of ascetic love that is considered as a form of *ibada* (worship). For attaining *ma'rifa*, the first step is to be well versed in Islam sciences and other disciplines that is essential for leadership. Secondly, *ma'rifa* is of two kinds: 'cognitional ('ilmi) and emotional (hâli)'.<sup>26</sup> For *sayyidhood* leadership both are necessary. The later one can inspire *zawq ruhani* (spiritual joy and satisfaction) which will be a source of motivation for serving. The *Sayyid* is also expected to be one of the best ethically among the tribe or nation as the majority of mufassirs (Qur'anic exegetes) agree on it.

The second word '*al-qawm*' translates to the people or the tribe. It is with *harfi ta'rif* (letters of *alif* and *lam*) which means the tribe or

people are well-known by the leader from administration perspectives according needs of the time. A tribe or a nation can include all types of people, poor, rich, saint, sinner, Muslim, non-Muslim, pious, atheist and various ethnic groups. *Sayyid' al-qawm* means a knowledgeable and compassionate servant who serves of all people without any discrimination and favouritism. This shows the universality of *sayyidhood* leadership.

The third word of hadith '*khadim*' comes from the root word for *khadama*, service. Based on that word, we have the word '*khidmah*', meaning to serve, be of service, provide work, or put into operation while '*khadim*' means domestic servant, attendant, or waiter.<sup>27</sup> Detailed meanings include a person whose job is to provide a service in a public place, someone who does menial work or is employed as a designated person or government official, or a servant in a royal or noble household.

The word '*khadim*' in the hadith is a form of 'ism fa-eel'. Lexically, *fā' il* means 'doer'<sup>28</sup> and person doing pointing to a continuous action, and meaning that a leader must always serve his people without discriminating against anyone. Also, because *khadim* is a form of 'ism fa-eel' and by adding the noun of "*hum*" it means the availability of a leader at all time in case of any one in the nation needs to be served. Another aspect of the quality of "*khadim*" is humility which constrains the leader not seek fame or pride. Nursi views fame as a serious spiritual sickness<sup>29</sup> and poisonous honey that kills the heart(spirituality).<sup>30</sup> Particularly for a leader. All words of the hadith point out the universality of *sayyidhood*.

Nursi revives leadership through service (*khidma*) not just in theory but also in practice. He states that "we are hands working (*khadims*) on a dominical boat which will disembark the Community of Muhammad (pbuh) at the Realm of Peace, the shore of salvation."<sup>31</sup> He believes that serving God is incomplete without serving humanity through faith, crucially forming a link between a traditional understandings of religious piety (*taqwa*) with social



action. Nursi revives leadership through service (*khidma*) not just in theory but also in practice.

Instead of using the word 'leadership,' Nursi uses the word '*khadim*' from the hadith. He draws and acts upon the belief that a leader should never see himself as a leader, but as a servant of Muslims and all people. Nursi displayed this in the form of a theoretical concept and principle in *Risale-i Nur*.

According to Nursi, *khadimhood* is to disregard one's desires and strive for others' wellbeing without showing off or seeking attention.<sup>32</sup> The '*khadim*' does not get proud or boastful because his duty is to serve the people and he sees every person as a master. The salary or wages he receives should be just enough to see his basic needs. A *khadim* cannot become wealthy because of his wages and must be in a situation similar to that of his or her poor citizens or constituents. Nursi ends by saying that a sincere *khadims* can be said to be spiritually a part of *Ahl al-Bayt*, the family of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). This is because they have no worldly ambitions.<sup>33</sup>

Looking at the above-mentioned hadith in historical context, it is seen how the Prophet first serves his people before speaking about the importance of serving people. He responds to rudeness with a gentle smile before beginning to talk, perhaps as a way of diffusing the negative feelings and making his position clear. This is a characteristic of the Prophet, practicing before preaching and to wait a short time before speaking or responding. Therefore, the leadership through actions comes before leadership through words. The leader should be opened to any criticism and respond it with the words of wisdom as the Prophet did. The way to educate leaders and build their character is not solely through courses in religion, leadership or ethics, but mainly through the setting of good examples, known as *tamthil*.

*Sayyidhood leadership in Nursi's works*, the sultanate of hearts is preferred to the sultanate of politics and servanthood is opted to ordering and commending. Nursi's lifestyle, particularly during the "New Said" period and his works, reflect *sayyidhood* leadership despite he never claimed or considered himself as a leader but as servant of the Qur'an. He describes himself as *Raju'l Fajer*, a sinful man,<sup>34</sup> and *Asi Said*,<sup>35</sup> Rebellious Said. By calling himself with such titles Nursi follows the way of companions (*sahaba*) and great scholars. He applies a deeper meaning of humility in Islam and wants to show the people that the source of all success and goodness is only God not from anyone else as the Qur'an states: "What comes to you of good is from God..."(4:79). In light of this verse, a believer particularly a pious and knowledgeable one attributes his/her good deeds to the enabling God while accepting all responsibility for his/her misdeeds. So Nursi too.

In the history of Islam, the Prophet, his companions, numerous saints, purified, perfected scholars, and those honored with nearness to God, have held that the signs of greatness in the great, are humility and modesty. While recounting the Prophet's Ascension (to the heavens), the Qur'an refers to him as God's servant<sup>36</sup>, as a sign of his humility and utmost modesty. Abu Bakr Siddiq, the second caliph views himself as bankrupt in righteousness.<sup>37</sup> Nureddin Zangi (1118-1174) calls himself a dog.<sup>38</sup> Imam Rabbani (1564-1624) views himself less valuable than a donkey.<sup>39</sup> Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) states that "the more on is humble to himself, the more he is raised up to God."<sup>40</sup> Abd al-Rahman Jami (1414-1492) is known as the first scholar who called himself *Qitmir* lamenting the separation of the beloved or humiliating himself by writing that he is as low as a dog.<sup>41</sup> By humbling themselves, they wanted people's favor to be directed to the religion or the nation instead of a pride for egoism. There is a difference between humiliation and humility. Humility (*tawadu'*) is an honourable attribute in the sight of God and a spiritual ethical principle in Islamic tradition.

For Nursi, giving up egotism and being humble is one of the preconditions for serving Islam, particularly in leadership. Nursi states that “you should know that this century the people of misguidance have mounted the ego and are galloping through the valleys of misguidance...The people of truth have to give up the ego if they are to serve the truth.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the former righteous and exacting religious scholars (*Salaf Saleheen*) were ego-free servants of the Qur’an. If the works of *Salaf Saliheen* are considered a huge treasury and sufficient for every ill including leadership, but there is a need of a key to open it to benefit for this century in his works. However, there is a need to revive their works according to needs of time.

### SAYYIDHOOD IN RISALE-I NUR

Although Nursi views Imamate [Leadership] as matter of secondary importance, he considers a subject in the sciences of theology (*kalâm*) and the principles of religion.<sup>43</sup> As a theologian, Nursi particularly, during the “New Said” refrained from the politics. His involvement with *sayyidhood* is more spiritual than politics.

Nursi uses the *Sayyid* title so often for the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) and then for his descendants. Nursi considers the Prophets’ descendants are the centre for the spiritual, moral progress of the ‘World of Islam’ and the source and guardians of the Prophet’s practices. Also, they are charged with complying the Prophet sunnah in every respect.<sup>44</sup> He calls the Prophet as *Sayyid* of all saints.<sup>45</sup> Nursi summarises *Sayyids*’ main tasks are to enlighten people regarding the faith, guide them to the right path, particularly during mischief, corruption and chaos of *ummah*. He states that they “stand as commanders at the head of all blessed chains of spiritual authorities in the assemblies of all the regions of the world in all centuries.”<sup>46</sup>

When Salih Ozcan asked Nursi, if he is *Sayyid* or not, he responded that his both parents are *Sayyid*. His mother Nuriye is a descendant

of Husain and father is a descendant of Hasan.<sup>47</sup> However, he never publicised it in his life time.

In the next section, this paper will focus on four major and distinguishing characteristics that are associated with *sayyidhood* in Nursi's spiritual leadership philosophy: *tamthil*, *istighna*, not having worldly ambitions, a state of being expectationless, or expectations for reward or recognition, *ithar*, altruism and *musbet hareket*, positive action.

*a. Tamthil or the inadvertent overspill of genuine practice*

For Nursi, *tamthil* comes before *tabligh* for *da'wah* and he believes that the finest representatives of Islam throughout Islamic history were the Prophet, his companions, and then his descendants or *Sayyids*.<sup>48</sup>

Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) represented a universal *tamthil* of Islam at the peak of a complete perfection as messenger of God because he was sent "as a mercy to the worlds" (Qur'an, 21:107). In the Qur'an it is stated that "there has certainly been for you in the Messenger of God an excellent pattern for anyone whose hope is in God and the Last Day and [who] remembers God often" (33:21). The Prophet had two aspects of his mission which are *tabligh* and *tamthil*. His *tamthil* includes every aspect of his life is at the degree of peak of *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human. This is essential for all prophets who represented the truths at the highest level according to Islamic theology. Because the issues related to faith can be elucidated through *tamthil*. In fact, acceptance of truth by the people depends on the degree of *tamthil*. It does not just apply to religious or ethical issues only but also to all fields, including politics, sciences, justice, human rights, dignity, the environment and so on. *Tamthil* can be applied individually, as a group, nation, or ummah, that is, the whole Muslim community.

The *tamhtil* will be more effective in a peaceful society because, during conflicts, firstly the truths are killed and they cannot be heard. Nursi states that where there is conflict or heated arguments, the truth cannot be presented or heard.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Islam was spread so quickly throughout the Arabian Peninsula after the Prophet signed Hdaybiyya Peace Treaty with Meccan polytheists. A Muslim is a representative of peace on earth and is “the one from whose hand and tongue other Muslims are safe.” as the Prophet mentions.<sup>50</sup> In that case, it is wrong to do anything which can harm peace and safety.

It is a characteristic of *Sayyid* to seek wining people over, not politically, but spiritually. Displaying another trait common to the majority of *Ahl al-Bayt*, they refrain from politics, focus on enlightening hearts and minds. Nursi refers to the Prophet’s cousin Ali (r.a), as the ‘King of Sainthood.’ He was a blessed person, worthy of the highest position, not merely of political rule. He became a spiritual ruler whose status surpassed that of the political Caliphate, a Universal Master, whose spiritual rule will continue even until the end of the world.<sup>51</sup>

The truths of religion can be conveyed in the best way through the *tamhtil*, precisely the subjective principles such as faith in God, the hereafter, angels, hell and heaven etc. Without a perfect *tamhtil*, these articles of faith cannot be understood or believed. Therefore, there was need of prophets for role modelling. God sent prophets to show the religion through *tamhtil*. Nursi states that the truth can be understood if it is clothed with the cloth of *tamhtil*.<sup>52</sup> Otherwise, it will be like a utopia which will be seen as impossible to put into practice. If the *tamhtil* is not perfect, the religion cannot be understood properly. If religion is only conveyed through proselytising, then it will become like an ideology and will not exist any longer (like Fascism and Communism). It can be said that for Nursi, *tamhtil* is an indispensable characteristic of *sayyidhood* leadership.

*b. Istighna (a state of being expectationless) in Sayyidhood*

*Istighna* minimises conflict of interest in the leadership. Nursi views believers, especially those who serve the religion [imams, sheikhs who are considered spiritual leaders by the people], as having an obligation to serve humanity without expecting rewards, material or otherwise, because the world is an 'abode of service,' not the place of pleasure, reward, and requital.<sup>53</sup> He calls this '*istighna*<sup>54</sup>' in *Risale-i Nur*.

According to verses of the Quran, one of the essential characteristics of prophets is *istighna*. The verse "*in ajriya illa a'la rabbil alemin*" ('...I ask you for no wage; my wage is only due from God...'10:70) or in similar form is mentioned twelve times. Three times it refers to Prophet Noah, who conveyed the message of God for close to a millennium and lived longer than any other prophets. Suitably, the first time the *istighna* verse appears, it is about Noah. Both of these show the significance of *istighna* in leadership.

*Istighna* is a component of the companions of all prophets, saints (*awliya*) and great leaders in Islamic history. Well-known examples include four Rightly Guided Caliphs, Umar ibn Abdul Aziz (682-720), Salah ad-Din Ayyubi (1138-1193), Imam A'zam (699-767), Imam Malik (711-795), Imam Shafi'i (767-820), Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855), Imam al-Ghazali and Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273). These leaders led a simple life, gave away or shared what they received as gifts or spoils of war, and did not leave any inheritance. Among Saladin's possessions at the time of his death, there was one piece of gold and forty pieces of silver.<sup>55</sup> He had given away his great wealth to his poor subjects, leaving almost nothing to pay for his funeral. Following the greatest leaders in the history of Islam, Nursi did not leave any inheritance except little money which was sufficient for his burial. Nursi strictly applied *istighna* principle in whole of his life.

c. *Ithar* (altruism)

Cambridge Dictionary defines altruism “willingness to do things that bring advantages to others, even if it results in disadvantage for yourself.”<sup>56</sup> The term is used as the contrary of “self-interested or “selfish” or “egoistic.”<sup>57</sup> According to al- Ghazali , *ithar* or sacrifice for others is the highest stage of generosity.<sup>58</sup> Like Sufis, Nursi calls this ‘*tafani*’ as “annihilation in the [Muslim] brother.”<sup>59</sup> This means that a person forgets the feelings of his own carnal soul and lives as part of a collective personality, a *jama'ah*, and ultimately, the *ummah*. In that way, each person is like a bodily organ working together with other organs without harming one another. Just as the hand does not harm the eye, but protects and cleans it, the believers protect and support each other.<sup>60</sup>

*Ithar* is one of the important characteristics of all prophets, their disciples, or companions, great scholars and spiritual leaders in human history. *Ithar* (altruism or preferring others to one's self) is one of the major principles of religions and an ethical principle of moral philosophy. It has a significant place in the Qur'an and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) who is the pinnacle in regard of altruism. It is also considered as an indispensable moral value for establishing a civilization. In *Risale-i Nur* *ithar* is based on the Qur'an, Sunnah and *Salaf Saleehen's* (the 'Righteous Predecessors' in the first two centuries of Islam) interpretations.

The Prophet's *ithar* is not just in this world but also in the hereafter. He would think his community<sup>61</sup> when everyone thought of himself or herself. Abdul Quddus Gangohi's (1456-1537) states that: “Muhammad of Arabia ascended the highest Heaven and returned. I swear by God that if I had reached that point, I should never have returned.”<sup>62</sup> As Nursi considers his ascension from the creation to the Creator as inner face of sainthood but returning from the Creator to the creation is his messengership<sup>63</sup> which is the highest degree of altruism. By applying *ithar*, the leader will be an example to other

public staff. In return, it will create prosperity and progress for a society.

*d. Positive Action*

The Prophets are embodiments of positive action<sup>64</sup> including in leadership. Positive action dictates a focus on what needs to be done rather than reacting to others. It means engrossing oneself in constructive actions of the building and repairing rather than engaging in destructive behaviour.<sup>65</sup> There is a strong correlation between positive action and *sayyidhood* leadership. One characteristic of *sayyidhood* is having a gentle persuasion as the Prophet responded to the bedouin and refrained from inciting conflict. The Prophet's strategy was to make friends out of enemies.<sup>66</sup> Those who act positively are pro-active rather than reactionary. They prefer peace instead of conflict as much as they can. Acting positively is seen by Nursi as an essential principle of serving.

Just like many great spiritual leaders including Nursi is no stranger to suffering assaults. As Hans Kung argues in the early Turkish Republic era, the government engaged in an ambitious and Jacobin secularisation program that essentially sidelined Islam from all aspects of life and oppressed religious leaders.<sup>67</sup> His responses to aggressive secularism or accusation were according to philosophical, ethical, and legal principles. He responded to the accusations and charges through means of a lawyer or legal processes. Despite all oppression, tyranny and suffering, Nursi and his followers did not revolt or preached for the revolt.

In my humble view, there are six major reasons for Said Nursi act positively against aggressive secularists and some jealous religious leaders.

1. The strategy of the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) and the other prophets mentioned in the Qur'an were to form



friendships and alliances instead of creating enemies or cementing hatred. So, Nursi followed the same strategy.

2. Nursi views securing safety and stability in a country as the duty and obligation of all.<sup>68</sup>

3. He sees every individual including those who are anti-religion as potential believers or future friends.

4. Nursi believes Islam means peace and it can be flourished in a peaceful society. Where violence wreaks havoc, it is not possible to convey the truth and principles of faith.

5. If patience is not shown against oppression and injustice, and the response is a negative action such as violence, it can lead to breaching of innocent people's rights and even conflict. This will cause more oppression and provoke further enmity.

6. Responding to injustice and oppression negatively will only harm the enforcers, not the people who decide and order for the injustice.

Positive action means to focus more on the major problems rather than prioritising minor one and try to solve them in a civilised way instead of blaming external causes. By doing that Nursi is applying Ibn Arabi's "*al-insan al-Kamil*" perfect human model in the service of faith and humanity. He brings faith, Islam and human together. This leads to a productive and beneficial role model<sup>69</sup> which is characteristic of *sayyidhood* leadership.

Nursi's definition and application of *sayyidhood* leadership philosophy is highly idealistic, particularly in a materialistic society. His understating of above mentioned hadith regarding leadership is *sunna* centred and rarely applied in the Islamic history by the rulers and most of the religious leaders. Possibly, it can be achieved by the spiritual elite in various levels.

In the contemporary world, political leadership revolves around benefit, national and self-interest. Although Nursi revived the guidelines for *sayyidhood* leadership, he does not provide the details in regard to how this can be applied in our modern times. Possibly, he left the details to be developed further according to needs of a society or a country. However, although it is very difficult, the spiritual aspect of *sayyidhood* leadership can be implemented as a role model is spirituality more than in politics.

## CONCLUSION

The leadership literature in general has avoided religious sources and in particular Islamic sources. Although some notable attempts have been made in recent years to identify a good leadership model for Muslims, it was done within the Western leadership framework and trying to fit Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) leadership style in these frameworks. This has restricted the identification of what leadership style Islam proposes especially when Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as the quintessential archetype of leadership is considered by Muslims. This paper attempted to establish an Islamic leadership framework and identified four characteristics of what is called *sayyidhood* leadership model. This model was then applied to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to further refine it and tested on Said Nursi as a relatively modern Muslim scholar who discussed these characteristics in his writings and represented them in his spiritual leadership style. As mentioned above, it is highly idealistic but it can be applied in different levels. At a time when Muslims need leadership and are looking for the best leadership models to get them out of the crisis they are in, *sayyidhood* leadership model offers some hope.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Greenleaf, R. K. *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (25th anniversary ed.). New York: Paulist Press, (2002)
- <sup>2</sup> A section of this article is published in Salih Yucel's book "A Life in Tears", (New Jersey, Tugrahbooks, 2017)
- <sup>3</sup> Said Nursi, *Tarihce-i Hayat*, (Istanbul: Envar Nesriyat, 1995) 620.
- <sup>4</sup> Nursi, *Tarihce-i Hayat*, 621.
- <sup>5</sup> Ozcan Keles defines tamthil as "The inadvertent overspill of internalisation", Ozcan Keles Blogsite, <http://www.ozcankeles.org/tamsil-the-inadvertent-overspill-of-internalisation-21/> retrieved 23.02 2017
- <sup>6</sup> See Abu'l Hasan Al- Mawardi, *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah*, trans. Dr Abdullah Yate, Ta-Ha Publications, London , 1996
- <sup>7</sup> See Al-Ghazzali, *Nasihah al-Muluk* (Counsel of Kings), trans.F.R.C. Bagley, (Oxford University Press, London 1964)
- <sup>8</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, (New York, Princeton University Press, 1969)176-177, 201-202, 388-389.
- <sup>9</sup> See Imam Rabbani, *Mektubat Tercemesi*, Huseyin H. Isik, (Istanbul, Hakikat Kitabevi, (2014)
- <sup>10</sup> Rafiq I. Beekun & Jamal Badawi, *Leadership: An Islamic Perspective*, (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publication, 1999) 14-15.
- <sup>11</sup> See Sami Helewa, Models of Leadership in the Adab Narratives of Joseph, David, and Solomon : Lament for the Sacred, Lexington Books, published online, 1.11.2017.
- <sup>12</sup> *Salaf Saliheen* is an honorific title which is being used for the first three generations of Islamic history. They are the companions (*sahabah*) their successors (*tabiun*) and successor of the successors (*tabau tabiun*)
- <sup>13</sup> Said Nursi, *The Letters*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Ofset, 1997) 68-69
- <sup>14</sup> At- Tabari, *Jamiu'l Bayan*  
<http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=39&tDisplay=yes&Page=6&Size=1&LanguageId=1> retrieved 10.9.2015 \
- <sup>15</sup> Al-Zamakhshari, *Al-Kashaf*, available at  
<http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=2&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=39&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1> retrieved 1.9.2015

<sup>16</sup> Fakruddin ar-Razi, *Maḥatihu'l Ghayb*, available at <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=4&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=39&tDisplay=yes&Page=3&Size=1&LanguageId=> retrieved 1 1.9.2015

<sup>17</sup> Al-Qushayri, *Lataifu'l Isharat*, available at <http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=31&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=39&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1> retrieved 1.9.2015

<sup>18</sup> Muhammad Husein Tabatabai, al-Mizan, available <http://www.almizan.org/>

<sup>19</sup> Tirmidhi, Hadith no: 3615, <https://sunnah.com/urn/634770> retrieved 17.04.2017

<sup>20</sup> Bukhari, *Fadâilü ashâbi-Nabî*, 22, Sunan Abu Dawud Hadith no 4662 <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/42/67> retrieved 11.04.2017

<sup>21</sup> Ho, Engseng, *Graves of Tarim*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006) 149, Morimoto Kazuo, "Introduction", in *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet*, edited by Kazuo Morimoto, (London: Routledge, 2012) 1-13.

<sup>22</sup> Abu Dawud, Hadith no 4647, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/42/52> retrieved 22.04.2017

<sup>23</sup> It means group solidarity. According to Ibn Khaldun it is social solidarity and sense of same goals. For detail information see Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, chapter I and II, [http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ik/Muqaddimah/Chapter1/Toc\\_Ch\\_1.htm](http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ik/Muqaddimah/Chapter1/Toc_Ch_1.htm) retrieved 10.14.2015

<sup>24</sup> Deylemî, *Müsne'd*, II, 324, Hindi, *Kenz'ul-Ummal*, c. 6, s. 710 in Fethullah Gülen, *Messenger of God: Muhammed*, (New Jersey: The Light Inc, 2005) 270.

<sup>25</sup> Sayyid means "Leader or chief. - (over)lord ; boss ; distinguished ; eminent ; emir ; emperor ; generous ; high-ranking ; king ; leading personality ; magnanimous ; magnate ; monarch ; noble ; noble(man) ; notable ; peer ; person of distinction ; president ; prince ; principal ; senior ; sir ; superior ; supreme ruler. See Lexilogos Arabic Dictionary, <http://www.almaany.com/en/dict/ar-en/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AF+%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%85+%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%85%D9%87%D9%85/> retrieved 3.10.2015

- <sup>26</sup> Ali Hujwiry, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, trans. Reynold Nicholson. (London, Luzac, 1967) 267 cited in <http://islam.uga.edu/marifah.html> retrieved 24.02.2018
- <sup>27</sup> Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, edit by J. Milton Cowan, third edition, (New York: Spoken Language Services ink. 1976) 229.
- <sup>28</sup> Michael G. Carter, "Ism al-fā' il", in: *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, Managing Editors Online Edition: Lutz Edzard, Rudolf de Jong. 2017 <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1570-6699\\_eall\\_EALL\\_SIM\\_vol2\\_0031](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1570-6699_eall_EALL_SIM_vol2_0031)>  
First published online: 2011
- <sup>29</sup> Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, trans. Sukran Vahide, (Istanbul, Sozler Publication, 2001)121.
- <sup>30</sup> Said Nursi, *Al- Mathnawi Al- Nuri : Seedbed of the Light*, trans. Huseyin Akarsu, The Light, New Jersey, 2007)124.
- <sup>31</sup> Nursi, *The Flashes*, 215.
- <sup>32</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans Sukran Vahide, (Istanbul, Sozler Publication, 2001) 493.
- <sup>33</sup> Said Nursi, *Mudafalar*, 107.  
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- <sup>34</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 488.
- <sup>35</sup> Nursi, *Masnawi Nuriyya*, 169.
- <sup>36</sup> Qur'an, 17:1
- <sup>37</sup> Fethullah Gülen, *Al- Qulubu Dari'ah*, (Izmir: Defne Yayinlari, 2013) 21.
- <sup>38</sup> Amir Maluf, *The Crusaders Through Arab Eyes*, (Manufactured in USA: Al-Saqi Books, 1984) 224.
- <sup>39</sup> Fethullah Gülen, *Yeni Umit*, V.32, (1996):2-3
- <sup>40</sup> Imam al-Ghazali, *Ihya Ulum ad Din*, trans. Fazl 'ul Karim, III, (Karachi:Daru'l Ishat, 1993) 253.
- <sup>41</sup> Farah Fatima Golparvaran Shadchehr, *Abd al-Rahman Jami: Naqshbandi Sufi, Persian Poet*, Unpublished Dissertation, (The Ohio State University, 2008)77-105. available at [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws\\_etd/document/get/osu1217869380/inline](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/osu1217869380/inline)

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<sup>42</sup> Nursi, *The Letters*, 490.

<sup>43</sup> Nursi, *The Flashes*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Nursi, *Flashes*, 39.

<sup>45</sup> Nursi, *The Letters*, 237.

<sup>46</sup> Nursi, *The Letters*, 515.

<sup>47</sup> Necmeddin Sahiner, *Son Sahitler, Emirdag Sehileri II* p 31 available <http://www.nur.gen.tr/tr.html#maincontent=Risale&KitapId=458&islem=read&BolumId=8554&KitapAd=Son+%u015eahitler&searchText=Seyyid&SearchType=1&SearchStyle=1&Books=0&pindex=10&Page=31>

retrieved 1.10.2017

<sup>48</sup> For detail see 29<sup>th</sup> Letter 514-515 and the Fourth *Flashes*, 32-44

<sup>49</sup> Said Nursi, *Asari Bediyye*, (Istanbul: Envar Nesriyat, 2012) 107, 680.

<sup>50</sup> Bukhari and Muslim, <https://sunnah.com/riyadussaliheen/1/211>

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<sup>51</sup> Nursi, *The Letters*, 75.

<sup>52</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 619.

<sup>53</sup> Nursi, *The Flashes*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> Nursi, *The Letters*, 30-31.

<sup>55</sup> Bahā' al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād *The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin*. (London: Ashgate, 2002) 19.

<sup>56</sup> Cambridge Dictionary,

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/altruism> retrieved 28.04.2017

<sup>57</sup> Richard Kraut, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/altruism/> retrieved 28.04.2017

<sup>58</sup> Al-Ghazzali, *Ihya Ulum-id-Din, Revival of Religious Learnings*, V.3. p.194.

<sup>59</sup> Nursi, *The Flashes*, 216-217.

<sup>60</sup> Nursi, *Flashes*, 217. **A hadith states: "The example of the believers in their affection and compassion and benevolence is like the body; if one part of it becomes ill the whole body comes to its aid with fever and sleeplessness"** (Bukhari and Muslim).

<sup>61</sup> Allah's Messenger said, "For every Prophet there is one invocation which is definitely fulfilled by Allah, and I wish, if Allah will, to keep my that (special) invocation as to be the intercession for my followers on the

Day of Resurrection." Sahih al-Bukhari 7474

<http://sunnah.com/bukhari/97/100> retrieved 22.08.2016

<sup>62</sup> Abd al-Quddus Gangaohi, Lata'if-i Quddusai, ed. Shaikh Rukn al-Di'n, LaḤāfah 79; quoted in Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p 54.. See Chapter 7, "Two Forgotten Principles of Da'wah: Istighna and Ithar and the Hizmet Movement", in Yücel, Salih, and Ismail Albayrak. *The Art of Coexistence: Pioneering Role of Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement*. (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2014)

<sup>63</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 547.

<sup>64</sup> Fethullah Gülen, *Ve Gaybın Son Habercisi*, KDD, *Yeni Ümit*, (Istanbul, 2003) 3-5.

<sup>65</sup> Mehmet Ozalp, *Muhammed Fethullah Gülen* in *Great Spiritual Leaders: studies in leadership for a pluralist society* edited by Seforosa Carroll, William W. Emilsen, (Canberra: Barton Books, 2014) 39-40.

<sup>66</sup> Fethullah Gülen, *Messenger of God: Muhammed*, (New Jersey: The Light Inc, 2005) 251-252.

<sup>67</sup> Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007) 434.

<sup>68</sup> Yakup Arslan, "Contents and Principles of Risale-i Nur Service according to the Works in The Third Said Period of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," *Kopru*, (2010):112

<sup>69</sup> Bilal Sambur, *Musbet hareket forumu*

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